

## In Session

### Congress

## From Some Bush Supporters, Anger Over Budget

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**R**ed America is a bit red-in-the-face over President Bush's new budget. Within a few hours of the release of the president's proposal last week, Rep. John E. Peterson (R-Pa.), co-chairman of the Congressional Rural Caucus, fired off a statement criticizing the president he typically supports.

"We expected to fight cuts to rural programs under the Clinton administration," he said. "But those who are currently advocating these draconian cuts would not be in office today if it weren't for rural America. These cuts disproportionately target essential programs in rural communities while turning a blind eye to the wasteful spending that is rampant in many big cities across the country."

Peterson is no bleeding heart. The Pennsylvania Republican has a 91 percent lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union. But he realized quickly that the budget Bush proposed would hit hardest some of his most loyal supporters: the red states that voted GOP last year and other conservative constituencies across the country.

Agricultural programs would be cut 17 percent by 2010. Cuts in farm subsidies would hit solidly Republican southern states that produce cotton and rice. Veterans' programs would be cut 16 percent. Help for rural airports would be cut in half. Money for first responders would shift to urban areas.

According to an analysis of Bush's budget proposals, red states won by Bush in 2004 would experience cuts in federal grants in 2006 equal to 2.33 percent of their budgets on average. But blue states won by the Democratic nominee, Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.), in 2004 would lose federal grant money equal to only 1.74 percent of their budgets on average. The averages were compiled using an analysis of Bush's budget proposal by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal advocacy group, which looked at aid payments, other than Medicaid, to states.

In a budget that strictly holds down funding for domestic programs not related to homeland security, urban areas have plenty to complain about, too. Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, went so far as to compare Bush to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists, saying that with his budget "he is attacking America's cities."

But while criticism from Democrats is to be expected, many of Bush's fiercest supporters are the angriest. For example, Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), chairman of the Appropriations Committee, immediately dismissed Bush's agriculture proposals.

"I don't think anyone in the administration really thought Congress would go along with this," Cochran said. Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), chairman of the Agriculture Committee, has also voiced his objections.

One House committee chairman said that behind closed doors, Republicans are complaining bitterly about the proposed budget cuts. In a public sign of the tensions, House Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) lectured fellow Republicans on his committee during a hearing last week.

"I don't like some of the cuts I've seen in the agricultural budget," he said. "We are all going to have something we don't like. But you're not allowed to just come out here and criticize it and say you don't like it, and 'no' is the answer. 'No' is not an answer, all right? We're going to come up with alternatives and solutions if you want to be credible."

GOP lawmakers are in turn getting an earful from usually supportive organizations. Thomas Cadmus, national commander of the American Legion, said the proposed cuts to

veterans' health care are "not acceptable" and are an attempt "to raise revenue at the expense of veterans." (Some veterans who do not have service-related illnesses or injuries would be charged annual fees and higher prescription costs.) The American Farm Bureau Federation, likewise, has complained about the billions of dollars in agricultural cuts.

Peterson, the rural caucus co-chair, cites several program cuts that would hit particularly hard in Bush country: elimination of rural hospital flexibility grants for critical access hospitals; cuts in Rural Health Outreach grants to \$11

million, from \$39 million; eliminating the \$1.2 billion Perkins vocational education program; cutting the Essential Air Service program to \$50 million, from \$102 million; reducing the Manufacturing Extension Partnerships for small and mid-size businesses to \$47 million, from \$109 million; cutting the Agriculture Department's rural development program to \$13.5 billion, from \$15.5 billion; reductions in first-responder funds for rural areas; and cuts in payments to counties with large amounts of federal land.

"It does seem like rural areas are taking a disproportionate hit," said Paul Feenstra, a spokesman for Peterson.

It may well be premature for Republicans to get worked up about cuts that target red states. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) said that "if history is our guide," Bush's proposal on farm subsidies "may very well be nothing more than a decoy to divert attention from more devastating cuts" elsewhere.

So far, at least, Bush has said budget discipline would not be credible without the cuts in agricultural payments. "These are the kind of reforms that are necessary to earn the trust of the American people," he said last week.

**THE WEEK AHEAD:** The Senate plans to debate and vote on Michael Chertoff's nomination to be secretary of homeland security. The House is likely to give final passage to legislation setting limits on class-action lawsuits approved Friday by the Senate, sending the measure to Bush for his signature.

